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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL OSCE TU

SUBJECT: FIERY RHETORIC OVERSHADOWS LOW TURNOUT AT HUMAN
RIGHTS ASSOCIATION'S ANNUAL CONFERENCE

1.(U) Summary: Speeches critical of GOT policies, and graphic video clips of Turkish soldiers beating demonstrators overshadowed low attendance at this year's annual Human Rights Association (HRA) conference in Ankara. HRA President Yusuf Alatas called on the GOT to adopt a new constitution strengthening civilian control of the military and respecting basic human rights, and advocated a "comprehensive social movement" to end violence in the southeast. Such public criticism, unthinkable a decade ago, in itself shows the significant progress Turkey has made on human rights. The current challenge is for the HRA and its brethren to reenergize the public's interest in reform on complex but critical human rights issues such as freedom of expression and women's rights. End summary.

Fiery Rhetoric Overshadows Low Attendance

2.(U) A diverse array of human rights activists from NGOs and academia came together in Ankara on November 4-5 at the HRA's annual conference to elect a new president and approve the group's annual activity report. Despite the organization's prediction that at least 500 would attend the event, which fell on the group's twentieth anniversary, approximately 200, including some 40 women, took part. Diplomatic representation was limited to Denmark, Canada, and the US. The only politicians present were ruling AK party parliamentarian and human rights committee member Ersönmez Yarbay, and Democratic Society Party (DTP) Vice Chair Sedat Yurttaş.

3.(U) The conference opened with a stirring 20-minute film that took the viewer through 20 years of Turkish history through the eyes of the HRA. The film showed graphic clips of Turkish soldiers beating seemingly non-violent protesters after the 1980 military coup, southeastern villages that were torched in the 1990s, relatives mourning loved ones allegedly killed by the military, and the aftermath of an attempt in 1998 to assassinate HRA founding President Akim Birdal in his Ankara office.

4.(U) In his keynote address opening the conference and commemorating the HRA's twentieth anniversary, HRA President Yusuf Alatas, an attorney well-known for his courtroom oratorical skill, condemned the GOT for numerous human rights

violations. Alatas blamed the GOT for recent deaths from flooding in the southeast due to its neglect of the region, and criticized the government for its lack of progress on freedom of expression, reducing military influence on politics, women's rights, and extrajudicial killings. He called for Turkey to adopt a new constitution that strengthens civilian control of the military, allows for education in one's mother-tongue, strengthens local government, and respects basic human rights such as freedom of expression.

5.(U) Alatas also called for a "comprehensive social movement" to end violence in the southeast and create lasting peace. He told the audience that the civilian government, along with labor groups, human rights organizations, NGOs, academia, and the media should work together to create policies that will create peace in the southeast and end the need for constant military intervention.

Western Powers Blamed for Harming Human Rights in
Post-September 11 World

6.(U) Shifting the focus away from Turkey, Alatas lashed out at "imperialist western powers" for harming human rights worldwide in the post-September 11 world. Organizations such as the IMF, World Bank, and WTO said Alatas, have harmed the poor through privatizing public services. He blamed the United States and its allies for using the United Nations as a means to legitimize "illegal wars" in Afghanistan and Iraq while ignoring humanitarian crises in Sudan and elsewhere. Finally, Alatas condemned a new western mentality that considers torture as a legitimate tool.

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HRA President Yusuf Alatas Re-appointed for Two-Year Term

7.(U) On Sunday, the HRA elected its executive board, which in turn re-appointed Yusuf Alatas to another two-year term as president. According to Alatas, he agreed to continue as president to maintain consistent and firm leadership during the current PKK cease-fire and a generally critical period for human rights in Turkey. During the remainder of the conference delegates debated and ultimately approved the HRA's annual activity report.

8.(U) Comment: The content of the speeches and video at the HRA conference in itself demonstrates that Turkey has made significant progress on human rights. A decade ago, it would have been bold to attack the GOT in public for its policies on Kurds or other human rights issues, and downright dangerous to show graphic footage of Turkish soldiers beating civilians. This progress may have contributed to a more apathetic atmosphere, reflected by lower-than-expected attendance at the conference. The challenge the HRA and other human rights activists in Turkey now face is to reenergize the public on complex but critical human rights issues such as freedom of expression and women's rights. End comment.

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